

PREFACE

*'When the towns go down there are stains of
Rust on the stone shores and illegible
Coins and a rhyme remembered of swans, say,
Or birds or leaves or a horse or fabulous
Bull forms or a falling of gold upon Softness.'*

(Archibald MacLeish [1892–1982], '...& Forty-Second Street')

It would be no exaggeration if I were to tell you that my interest in the Silk Road borders on the obsessive, and has done so these past twenty years. The catalyst was the monumental Japanese TV documentary series *The Silk Road*, filmed when Central Asia was still firmly under Soviet control, China was grappling with the residual effects of the Cultural Revolution, and Afghanistan was – as it still is – embroiled in war. During the past ten years, perhaps for the first time since Genghis Khan and his descendants forcibly imposed the pax Mongolica on the lands between Eastern Europe and the Sea of Japan, it has been possible to travel the entire length of the old road in relative safety. In the khans' day it was said that 'a man might have journeyed from the land of sunrise to the land of sunset with a golden platter upon his head without suffering the least violence from anyone.' Today is a little different but I began, tentatively at first and then with growing confidence, to travel the old highways. In the beginning I journeyed alone but in recent years my long-suffering and ever-patient wife, Antonia Tozer, has accompanied me, carrying a large bag of camera equipment and (for the most part) a shared enthusiasm. We have visited the ancient places of the Silk Road and recorded what we saw; our journeys made to discover what remains and to record it before it is lost forever.

During the seven years it took to research and write this book there were times when my enthusiasm for the subject almost overcame me. The sheer beauty of the places I visited and the sense of freedom I felt produced an overwhelming desire to emulate Robert Browning's character Waring:

*'What's become of Waring
Since he gave us all the slip,
Chose land-travel or seafaring,*

*Boots and chest or staff and scrip,
Rather than pace up and down
Any longer London town?'*

(Robert Browning [1812–89], 'Waring'.)

Each time I returned to London's noise and drizzle, I sought solace among the aisles of the School of Oriental and African Studies library and discovered that its 850,000 books were filled with jewels. The standard texts on Asian art and history are there but so too are books by Victorian adventurers who rode bicycles to India, Edwardian hunters who trekked



Yanshui Gorge in snow
(Fig. 207)

* For more on Sir John Mandeville, see p. 225).

through the high passes of the Pamirs and Himalayas in search of game, and the accounts of some who wandered across Asia for decades and were just plain mad. Where else would one find a book called *Alone through the forbidden land: journeys in disguise through Soviet Central Asia* (by Gustav Krist), or one published in 1700 and concerning the fourteenth-century traveller (or according to many, the utter charlatan) Sir John Mandeville* (d. 1372) called *The travels and voyages of Sir John Mandevile, Knt.: containing an exact description of the way to Hierusalem, Great Caan, India, the country of Preston-John, and many other eastern countries: with an account of many strange monsters and whatever is curious and remarkable therein / carefully collected from the original manuscript, and illustrated with variety of pictures?*

These days, we are separated from most of the cities of the Silk Road by little more than a flight and an hour or two in a taxi, but it is still possible to follow the example of the great writers of history and learn to commune with the past. John Keats was stirred by literature – in his case it was Homer – while Edward Gibbon, author of *The History of the*

Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, drew inspiration from his surroundings:

*'Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold,
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;'*

(John Keats (1795–1821), 'On first looking into Chapman's Homer')

*'It was at Rome, on the 15th of October, 1764, as I sat
musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol, while the barefoot
friars were singing vespers in the Temple of Jupiter, that
the idea of writing the decline and fall of the city first
started to my mind.'*

(Edward Gibbon [1737–94], 'Autobiography')

The raw materials for this book, too – with all its faults and shortcomings – come from the Silk Road itself, from the histories of its states and their protagonists, and from the poetry and stories of the places that Tennyson called the 'ever-silent spaces of the East'.

INTRODUCTION

The past is closer than we think

*'How worlds are spawned and where the dead gods go,
All shall be shard of broken memories.'*

(Archibald MacLeish [1892–1982], 'Baccalaureate')

It is easy to forget that the great caravan cities of the Silk Road have, for the most part, been subjected to urban development and restoration projects only within the past fifty years. An examination of almost any pre-war photograph from China, Central Asia or the Middle East provides a glimpse of a lost era. There are people alive today who have looked upon the places of the Silk Road, albeit in a reduced and ruinous state, and seen pretty much what the contemporaries of Xuanzang or Timur would have seen. A

case in point would and should have been the inimitable Robert Byron (1905–41), whose occasionally tart observations of Persia and Afghanistan in *The Road to Oxiana* have entertained readers since they were written in 1937. Today, had the Second World War not claimed him, he would be a ninety-seven year old national treasure.

So, too, the indomitable missionaries Mildred Cable and Francesca French deserve a mention. The world they describe, of the old cities of the Silk Road before the advent of tourism; of journeys in western China requiring months instead of days to complete; and of traditions lost in antiquity but still practiced by the oasis-dwellers, occurred during the lifetime of our parents. Their classic, *The Gobi Desert*, for example, was published as recently as 1942.

And there is a country where even today, at the beginning of the third millennium, the Silk Road can still be seen in its



**Fig.1 An old caravanserai
reverts slowly to dust
on the road to Balkh.
Near Andkhoy, Northern
Afghanistan**
Probably Seljuk period,
ca. 11th century

There is a sixteenth-century water tower at the site known as a *sardoba* (literally 'cold water'), a domed structure built at many places along the caravan routes to provide a supply of fresh water to travellers. Snow was sometimes packed into them during the winter months.

Figs. 2 and 3 **Silk and tea, two of the Silk Road's many commodities**

Silk Worms (*bombyx mori*) consuming mulberry leaves
(Suzhou Silk Museum, China)

Card players at a teahouse, Wuwei, Gansu Province, China



original state; where men still drag caravans of camels along disintegrating roads; where cities wrecked by Genghis and Timur still tower above the highway, and where ancient caravanserais revert slowly back to the dust from which they were built. In Afghanistan, the people of the backroads still live with few of the amenities of the modern world. Two decades of conflict have, if anything, left them with less and Afghanistan has reverted to a sort of pre-industrial twilight era. The one hundred hotels of 1970s Bamiyan are rubble and no tourists now explore the labyrinth of caves about the Buddhas. A new layer of archeology has been added to the country's past: mines by the million lie in strata like the layers of some ancient city; Taliban mines lie on Mujahadeen mines that lie on Soviet mines. Villages across this beautiful, blighted country, from Torkham to Turkmenistan, are ruined and abandoned and sometimes it is difficult to

distinguish an old ruin from a new one. Many of its great cities are damaged or destroyed: Bamiyan has been erased, Hadda is now little more than a mound of earth and Ai Khanum has been dug down to the bed rock by those in search of treasure. But Balkh (at least to date) is untouched and still stands, resplendent beside the old road. If one searches in every country today for the essence of the Silk Road, it to be found, like nowhere else, in Afghanistan.

The Swedish explorer Sven Hedin passed through Xinjiang, the cradle of the Chinese section of the Silk Road, in 1933–35. It was his last expedition and he carried with him dreams of reviving the old Silk Road as a great motorized highway linking China with Europe. China was in the grip of warlords and the old road was in a wretched state:

'We now saw the Silk Road at its lowest ebb, with dormant life and dying trade, the connecting towns and villages in ruins, and the population languishing in a state of permanent insecurity and miserable poverty.'

(Sven Hedin in Hedin, 1938)

Its fortunes have since revived. It is now possible, more or less, to drive from Xian to the shores of the Atlantic Ocean without leaving a paved road, and even the remotest parts of Xinjiang have been opened up by the search for oil and other natural resources. Tourism has also arrived with a vengeance and the legendary travellers of old like Marco Polo and Xuanzang – were they to retread the ancient highways – would be severely challenged to recognize towns like Xian and Kashgar as they are today. The dangers now are not due to apathy and neglect – as they were in Hedin's day – although these problems still, of course, exist. Today it is China's phenomenal pace of economic development that threatens to submerge the old sites beneath an ocean of concrete. In Central Asia, too, the old caravan cities are threatened by urban expansion and, in some cases, by careless or excessive restoration. In twenty years time will Samarkand be a theme park? Will babes-in-arms live in fear of Timur once again, resurrected as some growling, posturing hologram? Among many of the countries along the Road, there already seems to be a headlong rush to sanitise the past, to recreate the old buildings with new materials and, on occasion, to appropriate the mantels of the great men of history for political ends.

Until *perestroika* there was little opportunity to explore the full extent of the Silk Road and in ten or twenty years, if this eagerness to restore and renew continues unabated, what will remain of the old road will be a pale, *ersatz* shadow of the way it really was. I hope that I will be proved wrong, but unless the nations of the Silk Road learn to preserve its cities and monuments with more patience and sensitivity, the four hundred or so photographs contained in this book may prove to be its epitaph.

Merchants, Monks and Migrants: The Traffic of the Silk Road

Baron Ferdinand Von Richtofen first coined the term 'Silk Road', or *Seidenstrasse*, in 1877, but it is a misnomer. It was not really a road at all; it was a vast network of land-based and maritime trade routes and the merchants who used it carried far, far more than just silk. The beginnings of land-based trade between Orient and Occident can probably be pinpointed to around 105 BC, when the Chinese Emperor Wudi (r. 140–87 BC) sent a group of Chinese emissaries to the court of Mithradates II (r. 123–88 BC), the Parthian ruler of Persia. Wudi's mission appears to have marked the beginnings of trade with Persia in 53 BC; the Persians unfurled dazzling silk banners during their battle with the Romans at Carrhae. The Romans are said to have fled in terror at the sight of the banners and were routed.

By 46 BC, however, Chinese silks had reached Rome. A triumphal procession for Julius Caesar in that year included silk canopies, and it was not long before the commentators of the day were lamenting the Romans' obsession with the new material and the drain it placed upon the economy. So pervasive was the new fashion that in 14 BC Rome's Senate was obliged to issue a ban against men 'disgracing themselves with the effeminate delicacy of silk apparel', but to little effect, it seems. The Roman commentator Seneca, writing in the first century AD, makes no attempt to hide his disapproval of women who wore silk:

'Silk garments provide no protection for the body, or indeed modesty, so that when a woman wears them she can scarcely...swear that she is not naked.'

(Seneca, 1st century AD, 'On Benefits')

During the first century AD, as trade increased between Rome and the East, many commentators criticised the apparently insatiable appetite among Romans for luxury goods:

'...we have come now to see...journeys made to Seres [China] to obtain cloth, the abysses of the Red Sea explored for pearls, and the depths of the earth scoured for emeralds. They have even taken up the notion of piercing the ears as if it were too small a matter to wear those gems in necklaces and tiaras unless holes were also made in the body into which to insert them...at the lowest computation, India and Seres and the [Arabian] Peninsula together drain our empire of one hundred million sesterces every year. That is the price that our luxuries and our womankind cost us.'*

(Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*)

Trade between East and West was to continue, despite interruptions caused by wars and politics, until maritime routes pioneered by European explorers in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries superseded the old highways. At different times and throughout its history, trading centres grew and prospered along the highways of the Silk Road. Great cities like the Abbasid capital of Baghdad, the Sogdian town of Samarkand and the Bactrian metropolis of Merv became dynamic entrepôts where goods were traded in both directions. Merchants did not lead their caravans across the whole route; they would transport their goods between two commercial centres and would then sell them on to other merchants. The caravan cities of the Silk Road benefited both from the trading of these goods and from the taxes and customs duties levied upon merchants. Along with trade goods came new ideas: religions, medical knowledge, scientific and technological innovations all passed in both directions and the Silk Road became a great network of veins and arteries, carrying the life blood of nations across the known world.

Silk Road commerce was driven by three basic factors: firstly, the obvious desire for profit; secondly, a fascination with the exotic; and thirdly, as a means to enhance the political power of a particular nation. All three issues will be discussed at length throughout this book. If anyone doubts that Silk Road commerce was truly global in nature, consider the following three items, each unearthed in distant corners of the earth in extraordinary circumstances: an Indian ivory mirror handle from the first century AD, found in the ruins of Pompeii, an Egyptian Pharaoh mask found in the thirteenth-century grave of a Mongol woman at Genghis Khan's capital of Karakorum in Mongolia and a seventh- or eighth-century bronze Buddha from Pakistan's Swat Valley, found in a Viking grave at Helgö in Sweden all reveal the extent to which the Silk Road disseminated its products. The notion that the peoples of ancient times seldom strayed from their home villages is a myth. People made journeys for the purpose of trade, to go on pilgrimages and, on occasion, for the sheer joy of travel.

As has already been mentioned, silk was the principal, but by no means the only commodity. A search through a substantial part of the extant literature on the Silk Road reveals literally dozens of different commodities and the following chart, which is by no means exhaustive, attempts to summarise the principal ones. There are also references throughout this book to the products of individual Silk Road cities, gleaned mainly from the writings of commentators of the time. Individual commodities are discussed in greater detail elsewhere in the book.

* *Seres* (the country of silk) was the name given by the Romans to China. Their notion of how silk was obtained was patchy at best: Pliny wrote, 'the Seres are famous for the wool of their forests. They remove the down from leaves with the help of water'; and Virgil thought that 'the Chinese comb off leaves their delicate down.'

SUMMARY OF TRADE GOODS FROM EAST AND WEST CARRIED BY LAND AND SEA

COMMODITIES FROM THE EAST

From India

Household slaves, pets and arena animals, exotic furs, cashmere wool, raw and finished cotton (cotton plants have been cultivated in India for 4,000 years), spinach (probably mainly from Nepal), sandalwood and other exotic woods, palm-oil, cane-sugar and perfumes (aromatics), gems (rubies, sapphires and emeralds although diamonds, surprisingly, were not prized by the Chinese).

From China

Silk, skins, iron, mirrors, weapons, porcelain (first manufactured around the 8th century), lacquerware, nephrite jade (from Khotan), rhubarb, tea.

Paper – traditionally thought to have been invented by the court eunuch Cai Lun in 105 AD.

Gunpowder, invented in China around the seventh century and first used by them for military purposes around the twelfth century. It reached Europe during the fourteenth century.

Medicines – Ephedra (Chinese: *Mahuang* – used for millennia in China to treat respiratory diseases. Ephedrine – now synthesized – was originally made from ephedra), Epsom salts, elixirs for immortality (which often shortened, rather than extended life), ginseng (the best was from Korea), snake bile (collected in Southern China and Indochina) and seaweed (a diuretic), among many other examples.

From various parts of Asia

Precious and semi-precious stones: including lapis lazuli (mined in Afghanistan), jadeite (from Burma), rock crystal, carnelians and other quartzes, rubies (from Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia), sapphires (from India, Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka).

Jewellery, ivory, tortoiseshell, rhinoceros horn, seashells and pearls.

Ornamental woods, gum resins and aromatics (camphor from China, Japan, Borneo and Indochina was highly coveted).

Silver and gold (especially from Southern China, Tibet and

Indochina but also imported from many other parts of the world).

Spices (especially pepper, ginger, cardamom, turmeric, nutmeg and cloves and, from India, Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia – cinnamon).

Cochineal and indigo used for dyeing fabrics and cosmetics
Minerals: sulphur (for elixirs, imported from Indonesia); realgar (or arsenic sulfide, found in many parts of the world – although the best comes from Hunan province in China – and used as an elixir, to treat skin diseases and, so it was believed, to convert copper into gold).

Ceramics.

Horses (Central Asian breeds were especially prized in China) and camels.

Flowers, including peonies, roses, camellias and chrysanthemums and tulips (tulips from Central Asia and Turkey first arrived in Europe in the 1550s and were so coveted in seventeenth-century Holland that a single bulb could sell for 5,000 guilders, more than the price of a house!).

Alfalfa for animal feed, millet.

Human beings: acrobats, Central Asian jugglers and musicians, Central Asian grooms, dwarves, household slaves, South Sea Island pearl divers, Southeast Asian dancers, foreign guards.

From Persia and the countries of the Middle East

Incense (from southern Arabia), dates, pistachios, peaches, walnuts, Tyrian purple (from the *Murex trunculus* shellfish) and indigo for dyeing; frankincense and myrrh; storax (an aromatic resin), muslin cloth, wines, glassware, olive oil and silver vessels (especially the work of the Sasanian craftsmen of Persia).

COMMODITIES FROM THE WEST

Merchants on the land routes and Roman ships, crewed by men from many nations, conveyed:

Wool and linen textiles, carpets, Baltic amber, Mediterranean coral, asbestos, bronze vessels, lamps, glass vessels and glass beads, wine and papyrus, huge quantities of coins and bullion, ambergris (from the sperm whale, used in the manufacture of perfume and collected along the African coast), entertainers, exotic animals and opium (opium poppies probably originated in the eastern Mediterranean and reached China in about the seventh century).

RELIGIONS (SPREAD ALONG THE TRADE ROUTES IN ALL DIRECTIONS)

Buddhism (arose in India and spread in both directions as far east as Japan and as far west as modern day Turkmenistan).

Islam (founded in the seventh century, it spread in all directions and now attracts a worldwide following of more than one billion devotees).

Christianity (arose in the Eastern Mediterranean and spread throughout the Roman world. Nestorian Christianity spread eastwards after the expulsion of Nestorius, patriarch of Constantinople, during the fifth century. It reached China by 635).

Manichaeism (developed in the Middle East during the third century and reached China by the seventh or eighth century).

Zoroastrianism (the state religion of Persia until the arrival of Islam in the seventh century, it had spread eastwards to China and India by the seventh or eighth century).

TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATIONS

Acquired by China from the lands to the west:

Harnesses, saddles and stirrups (from the steppe nomads), construction-methods for bridges and mountain roads, knowledge of medicinal plants and poisons, cultivation of cotton and seafaring techniques.

Acquired by the West from Asia:

Chinese inventions (summarized in the table below)

Medical techniques (especially from Arab scholars such as Ibn Sina)

Science and mathematics- algebra, astronomy and the Arab numerals that we use in the West today.

The use of passports (a Mongol innovation, known as the *paizi* or *gerege*)

Military techniques and strategies.

Architectural styles and devices (the Persian invention of the squinch allowed the addition of a dome and led to the construction of many of the world's great buildings).

The westward flow of Chinese technology occurred throughout the existence of the Silk Road. The renowned scholar Joseph Needham, in his monumental work *Science and Civilisation in China*, summarized the plethora of new inventions that reached Europe between the first and eighteenth centuries, often after a time lapse of several hundred years. There are many other examples, not listed below, such as the use of paper money, the abacus and the use of coal for fuel. The modern world owes a great debt to ancient China:

SUMMARY OF THE TRANSMISSION
OF MECHANICAL AND OTHER TECHNIQUES
FROM CHINA TO THE WEST

Type of device	Approximate timelag in centuries
SQUARE-PALLET CHAIN PUMP	15
EDGE-RUNNER MILL	13
EDGE-RUNNER MILL WITH APPLICATION OF WATER POWER	9
METALLURGICAL BLOWING ENGINES, WATER POWER	11
ROTARY FAN AND ROTARY WINNOWER MACHINE	14
PISTON BELLOWS	14 (approx.)
DRAW-LOOM	4
SILK-HANDLING MACHINERY (A FORM OF FLYER FOR LAYING THREAD EVENLY ON REELS APPEARS AROUND THE 11TH CENTURY AND WATER POWER IS APPLIED TO SPINNINGMILLS IN THE 14TH CENTURY)	3-13
WHEELBARROW	9-10
SAILING CARRIAGE	11
WAGON MILL	12
EFFICIENT HARNESS FOR DRAUGHT-ANIMALS: BREAST STRAP (POSTILION)	8
COLLAR	6
CROSSBOW (AS AN INDIVIDUAL ARM)	13
KITE	12 (approx.)
HELICOPTER TOP (SPUN BY CORD)	14
ZOETROPE (MOVED BY ASCENDING HOT-AIR CURRENT)	10 (approx.)
DEEP DRILLING	11
CAST IRON	10-12

'CARDAN SUSPENSION'	8–9
SEGMENTAL ARCH BRIDGE	7
IRON-CHAIN SUSPENSION BRIDGE	10–13
CANAL LOCK-GATES	7–17
NAUTICAL CONSTRUCTION PRINCIPLES (INCLUDING WATERTIGHT COMPARTMENTS, AERODYNAMICALLY EFFICIENT SAILS AND FORE-AND-AFT RIGGING)	UP TO 10
STERN-POST RUDDER	4 (approx.)
GUNPOWDER	5–6
GUNPOWDER FOR MILITARY USE	4
MAGNETIC COMPASS (LODESTONE SPOON)	11
MAGNETIC COMPASS WITH NEEDLE	4
MAGNETIC COMPASS USED FOR NAVIGATION	2
PAPER	10
PRINTING (BLOCK)	6
PRINTING (MOVABLE TYPE)	4
PRINTING (METAL MOVABLE TYPE)	1
PORCELAIN	11–13

(Adapted from Joseph Needham, 1961)

The migration of peoples along the trade routes

There was considerable traffic in human beings in both directions along the Silk Road and there were also many instances of mass migration of entire communities. We will examine the migration of the Yuezhi, founders of the Kushan Empire, elsewhere in this book and also look briefly at the Europoid mummies of the Tarim Basin but perhaps the farthest wanderings of any single people are contained in the migration of the Roma, or Gypsies, who now number between eight- and twelve-million souls and reside mainly in

Eastern Europe. The origin of the Roma is uncertain but there are linguistic similarities between the Romani language and some dialects of India. It appears that the Roma originated in northwestern India and departed from their homeland in about the ninth century. They moved slowly westwards through Iran and the Near East and by the fourteenth century were settled in the Balkans. Centuries of persecution and pogroms have caused the Roma to live in close-knit communities, often avoiding contact with non-Gypsies. The notion that contact with non-Gypsies, known as *Gorgio* to the Roma, is corrupting may originate in the group's Hindu origins.